Yale
BIBLE STUDY

Thessalonians 1 & 2

1 Thessalonians 2: The Bonds of Affection

We have noted that in this earliest letter as in his later letters Paul moves from his salutation to an expression of thanksgiving. Typically, these thanksgiving passages foreshadow some of the themes that Paul will address in the longer body of the letter—theological or ethical issues that are especially pertinent in his exhortations to his churches. In 1 Thessalonians, the use of the thanksgiving passage is unusual. Either there are two thanksgiving sections (1:1-10 and 2:13-16) or Paul writes one long thanksgiving. If we have here one long thanksgiving section, it is marked by an *inclusion*—a phrase at the beginning of the section is repeated with some variation at the end. This is a familiar rhetorical device. "This is the worst of times; this is the best of times" followed by a long list of lamentable and commendable features of the present situation and closing: "Indeed, this is the best of times; this is the worst of times."

Paul's *inclusion* here consists of 1:3 and 2:13.

"We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father…"

"We also constantly give thanks to God for this…"
In each case Paul's gratitude is for the steadfastness of the Thessalonian believers in receiving the word that he preached and in holding it fast against opposition.

Perhaps especially in 1 Thessalonians the thanksgiving does not simply direct us toward the real point of the letter. Perhaps the thanksgiving is the heart of the letter. Some scholars have suggested that 1 Thessalonians is an example of an ancient letter of friendship, whose purpose was above all to reiterate and strengthen the bonds of affection and respect between the writer and the recipient.

If you are old enough to remember letters written on paper and sent in envelopes, remember the ones you received from a parent when you were away from home for the first time. Perhaps you suspected that the long introductory paragraphs about how much the parent misses you and longs to see you were simply a set up for the real point of the letter, something like: "Why don't you ever call?" Or "Get those grades up before the end of the semester." But when you become a parent (or a friend or a lover), you discover that the heart

of the letter really is the confirmation of the bond of love, and that the last notes are a kind of postscript. Most important: "I love you." Secondarily important: "Call home."

The genuine longing and affection that we read in the first chapters of 1 Thessalonians indicates Paul's strong desire to reestablish and strengthen his friendship with the church he founded. The postscripts of the last chapters are important, but only as manifestations of the fundamental affection.

Paul's Bond with the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:1-8)

Paul reiterates and strengthens his relationship with the Thessalonians in at least two ways in these verses. First, he shows solidarity with their suffering for the sake of the gospel. Second, he insists that his ministry among them has been marked by integrity and familial affection.

He shows solidarity with the suffering of the Thessalonians by references to the stress that he has undergone in preaching the gospel (2:1-2). We cannot be sure about the nature of the opposition Paul has received. The reference to Philippi may represent his reminiscence of the events narrated in Acts 16 where Paul and Silas are imprisoned. (Silas is listed with Paul and Timothy in our letter's salutation). More generally the theme of persecution recurs later in this chapter, and in 2 Corinthians 1:5–11 and 11:23–29 Paul provides a list of the ways in which he has suffered for the gospel. Certainly, it is part of the power of the Gospel that good news raises up opposition and Paul—like the Thessalonians and like the churches in Judea—has born the burden of that opposition.

The references to the integrity with which Paul preaches the Gospel also remind many commentators of 2 Corinthians, where in chapters 10-13 especially Paul defends himself against accusations from the so called "super apostles" who have appeared in Corinth after his departure. Accordingly, many commentators have sought to discern in 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6 evidence of opposition to Paul's preaching among the Thessalonians. Does he protest that he preaches without guile? Then someone has accused him of trickiness. Does he protest that he preaches without financial gain? Then someone has accused him of greed.

Abraham Malherbe has shown how such antithetical self-descriptions ("not in guile but in sincerity") are typical in the self-designation of many first century philosophers and suggests persuasively that Paul's self-presentation here may not be a self-defense as it so clearly is in 2 Corinthians. Rather Paul uses the contrasts to clarify the positive claims he wishes to make about himself.

Paul's description of his own ministry here reminds us of the instructions Luke describes Paul giving to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. Both cases may represent a typical list of virtues for the faithful and honest preacher. That the virtues are typical does not mean that they are not important, just that Paul may not be contrasting himself with any particular opponents at this point.

In the last verses of this paragraph Paul's language moves from the philosophical to the familial. He is once again reinforcing the bonds of friendship and even more. The early Greek

manuscripts of 1 Thessalonians 2:7 provide two different versions of a key word. Either Paul was "gentle" (*epioi*) among the Thessalonians or he (and Timothy and Silas?) were "children" (*nepioi*). The textual evidence is mixed, but the sense of the paragraph works better if we translate "gentle" with the NRSV. This would lead appropriately to the image of the nurse, who is not only caring for children; she is caring for her own children. Paul images himself as nurse and mother! He is perfectly happy to be a gender bender if the image enhances his defense of his own apostleship and underlines his affection, leading naturally to the remarkable claim of friendship: "we determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves" (2:8).

More on Paul's Bond with the Thessalonians (2:9-12)

These verses expand on two themes. First, Paul underlines his financial integrity by insisting that he did not preach the gospel for personal gain. On the contrary, he worked with his hands to support himself. For further emphasis on his unwillingness to be paid for his apostleship, you might want to look at 1 Corinthians 9. Second, he draws on another familiar image—now he is not the nurse/mother of verse 7 but the father. His urging and pleading come not from an egotistical sense of his own authority (there's that rhetorical antithesis) but from his own deep affection for the church.

Notice though that the purpose of his fatherly exhortation is not simply to build personal integrity or familial solidarity. From the beginning of this letter it is clear that the Gospel and Paul's proclamation of that gospel come from God and lead to God. God calls the Thessalonians into his own power and glory; the power and glory that are to crown the faithful at the end of the age, and the power and glory that is manifest among them even now. (See 1:5)

Thanksgiving Renewed (2:13-16)

Verse 13 nuances and strengthens the claim of the whole epistle and of the preceding verses that it is God who is at work through Paul, among the Thessalonians, and then through the Thessalonians too. It is hard for us in an age that stresses human flourishing and self-fulfillment to understand Paul's strong claim. He presumably thinks human flourishing is just fine, but the Gospel is about the fulfillment of the transcendent purposes of God.

The next verses (vv 14-16) are complicated for at least two reasons. First, they are precisely the kind of statements that have led to the lamentable history of Christian anti-Judaism, if, as the NRSV reads, Paul is writing about the "Jews, who killed both Jesus and the prophets." Second, this description of the role of Jews in God's history of redemption sounds very different from what we hear from Paul about Israel and the Jews elsewhere—especially in Romans 9–11,

For both these reasons some commentators have argued that 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 is an interpolation, added to Paul's letter by a later hand. This is not the only passage in Paul that

has been attributed to a later editor, although there is no early manuscript of 1 Thessalonians that omits these verses.

For two reasons, we take the reading to be original. Firstly, Paul almost always writes with a set of issues in mind, and the issues for the Thessalonians were not the same issues as for the Romans (and some years intervened between the two letters).

Furthermore, we are helped by Abraham Malherbe's suggestion that it is equally possible to translate the Greek without the comma, so that the phrase reads: "as they for their part suffered at the hands of the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets." That is, Malherbe suggests, Paul is not saying that all Jews are implicated in the death of Christ, but that the very same group of Jews that persecuted Jesus and killed the prophets are now persecuting the church in Judea—most of whom, of course, are Jews as well. For a similar sentiment, see Matthew 5:5, 12.

The overall function of the passage is clear enough. The suffering that the Thessalonians undergo unites them in solidarity with followers of Christ in Jerusalem, who have been harassed by their fellow-citizens (mostly Jews) as the Thessalonians have been harassed by their fellow citizens (mostly Gentiles). In their suffering both the Judean Christians and the Thessalonian Christians suffer following the prototype of their Lord.

There is so much we do not know about early Christianity. We are not sure precisely what the troubles were in Jerusalem nor in Thessalonica. Certainly, there was social disapproval and family dissension for believers in both places; and in Jerusalem at least two early followers of Jesus suffered martyrdom, Stephen (Acts 7) and James, the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:2).

Paul's reference to the wrath of God in v 16 need not refer to any particular event but more generally to his repeated belief that the end times have begun. (See Romans 1:18). Indeed verse 16 might be translated not that God's wrath has overtaken them at last but that God's wrath has overtaken them as part of the consummation, the *telos*, the goal of God's work.

Paul's Travel Plans (2:17-20)

The chapter and verse divisions of our Bibles are the work of later editors. Neither Paul nor those who originally gathered his letters knew that chapter two was ending and chapter three was about to begin. We shall see in our next discussion how the first verses of chapter 3 provide the outcome of Paul's dilemma at the end of chapter 2.

What is apparent in these verses is, again, the strong stress on familial relations. Now Paul, who has been a nurse/mother and a father, relates to the Thessalonians as an orphan. The separation is not simply inconvenient, it is wrenching. A mother caring for a child, a father eager to instruct his offspring, an orphan separated from his family, all evoke an emotional response.

Again, we see the way in which Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians is undergirded by his understanding of eschatology—of the end of time. The claim that Satan has hindered him is

not simply a mythological nod to popular folklore but a conviction that at the end of times the prince of evil will even more furiously resist the work of the Gospel.

The claim that the Thessalonians are and are to be Paul's hope and crown and joy is not just a fancy way of saying he likes them ("You are my pride and joy"). It represents the deep hope that at the coming of the Lord, in the not too distant future, Paul will be able to present the Thessalonian church at the throne of judgment and grace as the proof and prize of his own faithfulness—to the end.